THE BISHOP OF OXFORD'S

SERMON

BEFORE

THE HOUSE OF LORDS,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 1800.

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED FOR A GENERAL FAST.

Die Jovis, 13° *Martii* 1800.

ORDERED by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament aſſembled, That the Thanks of this Houſe be, and are hereby given to the Lord Biſhop of Oxford for the Sermon by him preached before this Houſe Yeſterday, in the Abbey Church, Weſtminſter; and he is hereby deſired to cauſe the ſame to be forthwith printed and publiſhed.

GEORGE ROSE,

Cler. Parliamentor.

A

SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

IN THE

ABBEY CHURCH OF WESTMINSTER,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 1800.

BEING

THE DAY APPOINTED FOR A GENERAL FAST,

BY

JOHN, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD.

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MDCCC.

BRITISH MUSEUM

JOB xi. 12.

FOR VAIN MAN WOULD BE WISE, THOUGH MAN BE BORN LIKE A WILD ASS'S COLT.

THESE things were ſaid, if I may be allowed to aſſume the high antiquity of the book of Job, at an early period in the hiſtory of the world, when civilization was not yet far advanced. That the latter ſhould be true at that time need not ſurprize us, for it appears to be the character of ſavage man, and the tendency to exceſs in thoſe appetites and paſſions which it is the buſineſs of ſociety to correct; but ſuch a ſtate of the world ſeems ſcarcely ripe for the abuſe and exceſs of thoſe better faculties, which might be then ſuppoſed to be merely in their way to their full improvement. The fact however is, that men are in almoſt any ſtate prone to exceſs on either ſide; not only to the giving

way to ungoverned appetites, but alſo to the abuſe of the very powers which are given them for the better government of their lives. Hence has it been conſtantly verified by hiſtory, that it is never ſafe raſhly to deſert the beaten road of experience, and that, whenever this is done through conceit of overweening wiſdom, a door is opened for extravagancies and enormities, if not perfectly the ſame, yet analogous to thoſe of ſavage life, to break in, and erect confuſion in the place of order. If this truth has been ſeen in former hiſtory, it has never been more remarkably exemplified than in the tranſactions which have recently paſſed, and are now paſſing. At a time when civilization might have been ſuppoſed to have reached its utmoſt advancement, when the very nature of man might ſeem to have been trained and tutored by long accumulation of improvement, a ſeries of enormities has been brought to paſs at which the very ſavage would ſhudder; Property deſpiſed, Faith broken, and the Life of man wantonly ſported with. Single inſtances of theſe things have indeed continually happened, but a ſeries or ſyſtem of them has now been brought forward, and all theſe exceſſes either openly avowed or thinly palliated. It was once the boaſt of Chriſtianity to have ſoftened and meliorated

liorated the very horrors of war, no vain boaſt I preſume, but, in deſpight of that kindly influence which has ſo long prevailed, its horrors have now been redoubled, and ſpread wider than ever.

Under theſe circumſtances it cannot be unfitting the preſent ſolemnity to enquire into the cauſes and remedies of ſo great a corruption. We are now in the eighth year of a war, the extent of which has not only been greater than uſual, but its very character different and more malignant, and hence is it more difficult of termination than any other. The jealouſies of nations ſubſide, ambition is ſatiated or checked; but there is here a radical corruption, which knows neither bounds nor end.

It is indeed very right and befitting the preſent occaſion, and it is alſo the moſt obvious topick, to attribute theſe things in a ſummary way to the juſt chaſtiſement of Providence for the profligacy and ſins of the times. We have, I fear, made ourſelves liable to ſuch vengeance, and after manifold warnings have not corrected our errors. Such a conſtruction is alſo juſtified by the miſery of ſcarcity being more than once added to the calamities of war. But yet as God uſes men as his inſtruments

in theſe his judgments, if ſuch they be, it is not unſeaſonable for us to enquire whence men have drawn down upon themſelves ſuch heavy calamities, and have become the infatuated inſtruments of their own deſtruction, that we may, as far as in us lies, correct the preſent evil, and avoid the ſame in future.

I ſuppoſe the firſt beginnings of this miſchief may have ariſen from the Deiſtical writings which have prevailed in continual ſucceſſion for nearly a century paſt: to which might be added the Socinian, for they alſo are in their tendency ſubverſive of the reverence due to Revelation. Not that theſe were ſucceſsful in their attacks even in a ſingle inſtance, and they have been as they aroſe ably and ſolidly refuted; inſomuch that they have been thought an advantage to Chriſtianity, in the occaſion and provocation which they have given to the fuller diſcuſſion of its evidences and truths. By their means has our Religion been tried in the fire, and has come out unhurt. Yet would theſe perpetual cavils naturally lay hold on ſome minds, eſpecially in the prevalence of a vain and ſuperficial learning. Inſtead of the holy reverence once paid to the Scriptures, men's minds have been familiarized

liarized to the ſeeing them treated with levity in ſpeculation, and with neglect or contempt in practice, nay, even to their being made the object of ridicule and buffoonery. It is true indeed that the petty weapons of weak mortals, when they ſtruck againſt the armour of God, were eaſily repelled or ſhivered into pieces; but yet amidſt the corruptions and vanity of the world, they found the means to fix themſelves here and there in various quarters. The vain, the licentious, and the profligate, ſtudiouſly adopted and propagated them, the ignorant and unlearned found their faith weakened, and the reverential awe which was once their ſecurity lowered if not extinguiſhed. I enquire not whether all this was done ſyſtematically or not. Be it ſufficient that there were pretenders to Philoſophy, one after another, who by reiterated attacks urged with unceaſing and ſhameleſs perſeverance produced this effect, and prepared the way for greater evils to come.

But when men came to overturn Governments and Eſtabliſhments, and to make uſe of the multitude as their inſtrument, they found it neceſſary to have recourſe to other means. The refined reaſonings of the pretended Philoſophers were not within the comprehenſion of thoſe whom they

they would ſeduce: nay, the plain evidences of Chriſtianity were likely to weigh more with them, as the natural propenſity alſo of uncorrupted man leans to the ſide of Religion. They applied themſelves therefore not to their underſtanding but their paſſions. Of this kind I reckon the three great maxims ſtudiouſly proclaimed in the beginning of theſe commotions; that Inſurrection was a common and even ſacred duty, that the Will of the people was the origin and rule of all Government, and that Man had only to exert that Will in order to be well governed and to be free: which taken together are the great root and ſource of all the calamities which have lately overſpread the world; being flattery addreſſed to the populace in order to excite and foment their paſſions; being as oppoſite to true religion as to true polity.

With reſpect to the firſt of theſe, it is the aim of all Governments, whether Monarchical, Republican, or other, to make themſelves as far as poſſible durable and permanent. Nor is it an ambitious aim, but taken up with a view to their proper end, viz. to ſecure the lives and properties, and to provide as far as may be for the happineſs of its ſubjects. Amidſt perpetual fluctuations and changes there

there can be no ſecurity. Religion certainly inculcates no abject ſubmiſſion, but a dutiful reſpect to that which long conſent, ancient claim, and undiſputed cuſtom may have familiarized to the habits and minds of the people. It is true that there are emergencies which juſtify reſiſtance, when the Government ſhall have exceeded its proper limits, and itſelf have diſſolved the band of allegiance, but it is at beſt the laſt and ſad reſort of extreme neceſſity; never juſtifiable till that neceſſity be evident, and be generally acknowledged; to make which a common duty is prepoſterous, and leaves the ſecurity of Society the ſport of daily caprice.

But this was but the watch-word of ſedition. The root of the evil lies deeper in making the Will of Man to be the rule of Government. The Will of Man! that faculty which has no meaſure of right and wrong in itſelf, which it is never ſafe to comply with for a ſingle moment unleſs it be under the guidance of reaſon its natural ſuperior, and be alſo exempt from thoſe other its bad propenſities to follow the turbulence of paſſions, or ſeduction of appetite. It has been the object of all civil polity to reſtrain the intemperance of the Will, to preſcribe limits which it ſhall not paſs, to invent laws which

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may tame and ſubdue it, and direct it into its right channel, that it may not follow its own wild imaginations, but may have in view a common good and a publick intereſt, and looking forward ſtedfaſtly to theſe as its end may guide its ſteps in the paths of reaſon and of virtue. It has been ſtill more the object of Religion, eſpecially the Chriſtian, to enter deep into the heart of Man, and to chaſtiſe there the very firſt thoughts of evil, and the firſt motions of the Will towards ſelf indulgence, and to plant there an affection for heavenly things, founded on the utter extirpation of corrupt affections, and on the entire reformation of the natural affections which firſt ariſe. But it may be ſaid that it is the ſubdued Will of man which is the rule of Government. If ſo, it is not the Will taken abſtractedly, and ſhould not have been ſo expreſſed. Under this hypotheſis, it is reaſon, it is virtue, it is religion, which ſhould not have been kept out of ſight, if it were meant to give them full ſway, and aſſign them their proper office of ruling and governing mankind. More conſiſtently with modern politicks it may be urged, that by the Will is meant the collected Will of the people, which is held to be ſuch, that the errors and extravagancies of one will be checked and controuled by

thoſe

thoſe of another, till there come forth by mutual colliſion a general Will, fit for the purpoſes of Government, and, according to an adage frequently miſunderſtood and miſapplied, even worthy to be called the voice of God. Not to urge here that it is difficult or impoſſible to collect and aſcertain the general Will, that what is ſo called is uſually that of a few bold, daring, and turbulent ſpirits, who overpower by clamour the more ſober and temperate voice of the better citizens, not to urge here theſe difficulties, I ſay, that at beſt this is to leave ſo weighty a matter to the mere concourſe of atoms, and to truſt to chance to build up and accompliſh the beautiful fabrick of civil ſociety. But it is contrary to fact that the faults of individuals are corrected by the general Will. There are prejudices which infect whole bodies of men, as well as individuals: there is a falſe current of opinion, which prevails for a time with overwhelming force, and is afterwards renounced by poſterity, and ſinks into contempt. Neither are whole multitudes more exempt from flattery and ſeduction than individuals. The Demagogue is to the people what the flatterer is to the Prince or to the King; but more baſe; his artifices more groſs, his deſigns more pernicious. It is alſo true that multitudes when led

aſtray are both more ſhameleſs and more fearleſs than individuals. With the worſt of the latter the warnings of conſcience will make their way, and check the career of vice, or embitter its enjoyments. With the moſt powerful the fear of others whom they have outraged, or may outrage, will operate as ſome reſtraint. But in the commotions of the people all ſenſe of fear is extinguiſhed by the number of aſſociates, and the ſtill and ſilent voice of conſcience is overpowered by the loud conſent of applauding multitudes. The temptation of plunder is alſo always at hand to add fuel to the flame. In ſhort, by inculcating ſuch principles as theſe, we give the reins to every thing which is wild and inordinate in man, and we truſt in vain to the conceits and devices of worldly wiſdom to reſtrain them. We lodge the ſovereignty in that which can never be aſcertained, and which is both unfit and unable to exerciſe ſuch right if inherent in it. Let me aſk what have been the conſequences in the preſent times. I paſs over horrors ſuch as the worſt individual would ſhudder at, and draw back his hand: but what have been the more ſober conſequences? Liberty is proclaimed: a venerable name, and ever dear to us of this country, which however is but the means in civil ſociety, and not the

the end; but in the undefined ſenſe in which it has lately been uſed it is the very handmaid of ſedition, intolerant of the opinions of others, and regardleſs either of their lives or properties, envying them even the free exerciſe of the holy duties of Religion. True liberty acts under the controul of law, and admits of all its reſtraints. Equality is proclaimed: equality in the abſtract, ſuch as is impoſſible to be attained by man, and would not be deſirable if it could be attained. The wiſdom of the ancients even in Republicks which delighted moſt in their freedom ſcarcely knew of ſuch a term in the vocabulary of civil ſociety. The only equality which was their aim and purſuit was equality of laws, ἰσονομία, ſuch as we hope obtains in this country, where there is one law to the rich and to the poor, both for the ſecurity of his property and protection of his life[a].

Of the other principle I need ſay but little. It can gain no credit unleſs with thoſe who through extreme ignorance are flattered by it. All Hiſtory ſhews us that Government even of large ſocieties amongſt men, much more of nations and kingdoms,

[a] μόνον δὲ μόνιμον τὸ κατ' ἀξίαν ἴσον. ARISTOT.

is neither a work of little ſkill, nor of eaſy attainment; that it requires a very large ſhare of knowledge, diſcretion, and experience. The reaſon of which is evident. For the nature of man is complicated, and conſiſts of various paſſions and inclinations, which under the influence of opinions as various form themſelves into habits and characters differing as much from each other as the features of the human face. The combinations therefore of all theſe in ſociety can neither be eaſily underſtood, nor eaſily directed. To reſtrain their extravagancies, and to encourage their virtues, muſt of neceſſity require a deep inſight into human nature in general, and much local experience. An ancient writer has obſerved, that the Government of men would be as eaſy to the ruler, as that of his ſheep to the ſhepherd, or of his oxen to the herdſman, if their nature were equally well underſtood. The ſaying is true: but the difference conſiſts in this; that the knowledge of the mere animal is ſimple, that of the other exceedingly perplexed; it is a complicated web to unravel. But it is eaſy, they tell us, by the mere effort of the Will to be free. If to be free is merely to break ſome preſent ſhackles, or to diſſolve ſome exiſting Government, this work of pulling down may perhaps be eaſily accom-

accompliſhed by the force of a ſelf-willed multitude; but to be ſecurely and permanently free, to build up a fabrick which ſhall find a place for different ranks and orders of men, protecting each in their ſeveral rights, and providing for the peaceable enjoyment of them, to prevent its being undermined by the corruptions of vice, and to ſurround it with a barrier againſt the thirſt of power on the one hand, and the proneneſs to licentiouſneſs on the other, all this is ſurely the laſt work of conſummate wiſdom, which to ſay the truth has never yet been attained but imperfectly in the hiſtory of man during ſo many ages and after ſuch repeated trials: to teach men that it is an eaſy work is to deceive them groſsly; to ſuppoſe that we can ourſelves accompliſh it by deſerting the plain road of experience is the height of arrogance and preſumption. The conſequence has been in a neighbouring nation, that, in purſuit of this phantom which continually flies before them, they have been forging from time to time new fetters for themſelves, till the little finger of their demagogues has been heavier than the loins of their kings: and the whole reſts at preſent in an uſurpation of the moſt deſpotick kind with the mockery of repreſentation and freedom.

Theſe

Theſe then are the deſtructive principles, which have ſpread havock far and wide beyond the example of former wars, or civil commotions. I have ſtated them, not ſo much to reprove and expoſe them, as to hold them forth as a leſſon to ourſelves and others. Grievous are they to the ſufferers, but to poſterity, and to thoſe who ſtand apart from them, highly inſtructive.

We may learn firſt the danger of all violent innovations. Thoſe who enter into them with moderate views, and with good intentions, avoiding ſome preſent evil, or hoping to correct ſome preſent fault, are ſoon drawn into the vortex of thoſe more turbulent ſpirits, who always appear in ſuch times, and labour to confound all things. Thoſe who from confidence in their own influence or talents fondly think, that they can command the courſe and current of affairs, or even direct the ſtorm, ſoon find the reins fall out of their hands, and are ſuperſeded by another and another, as wave after wave, holding the ſame tranſient and precarious authority. This was ſeen remarkably in the troubles of this country in the laſt century; but in thoſe now before us the ſucceſſion, not only of perſons, but of conſtitutions themſelves as they are called, has

has been more rapid and more various. When we look back on ſuch tranſactions, we may indeed diſcover evident traces of deſign, and of a directing power, but that not human. It is the hand of God alone that ſteers the ſhip into port. But if in all caſes we incur the danger of creating a greater evil than that which we would correct, much more when the commotion is cauſed by looſening the bands of Religion, and ſetting free the inordinate will and ungoverned paſſions of man, or I might even ſay by giving unlimited range to his Reaſon. Even that our beſt faculty is prone to overſtep its bounds. But the Will and the Paſſions are thoſe which it is our duty, and ſhould be our conſtant ſtudy, to reſtrain. Hence as I conceive may we account for a remarkable difference between the troubles of the laſt century in this kingdom, and thoſe of the preſent times, and for the greater malignancy of the latter. The former were alſo productive of infinite diverſities of opinion, which appeared in numerous ſwarms of ſects. Yet ſtill Religious notions however miſconceived and perverted were the origin of all theſe, and the cover for them; and hence, when the phrenzy of the times was paſt, the return was not ſo difficult. The reſtraint of Religion was at hand, and wanted only

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to be adjuſted aright, and better underſtood. But theſe times have given birth not to a variety of ſects, but to a torrent of Infidelity; and hence, the mind of man being ſet free from all ſalutary reſtraint whatever, there are no means of return, unleſs men will again reſume together with the forms of legal Government the mild and neceſſary yoke of Religion, now abandoned, and even vilified by them. But to us the leſſon is for that very reaſon more aweful.

It was pronounced by one of the ſages of heathen antiquity, that abſolute Monarchy would be the moſt perfect form of Government, if the Monarch were poſſeſſed of perfect wiſdom and integrity: he did not mean thereby to recommend that form of Government: he knew that his hypotheſis could never obtain in the affairs of men: but he meant to ſhew the ſuperior advantages of that form in point of vigour and diſpatch, if ſecurity could be had againſt the abuſes which the folly and vices of men continually introduce. The ſame reaſoning may be applied in its proper meaſure to any other form, except that it would be a ſtill wilder project to ſeek for abſolute perfection in a whole people, or the greater part of them, than in a ſingle inſtance.

But

But the ſame reaſoning obtains ſo far, that we may ſafely pronounce, that the advantages of each will be improved, and their faults corrected, in proportion as thoſe in whom the power is veſted ſubmit themſelves to the diſcipline of reaſon and of law. The ſame thing which plucks out the ſting of deſpotiſm will ſoften the pride of Ariſtocracy, and allay the turbulence of Democracy; and it muſt be in ſubduing the Will of the people, not in giving the reins to it, and fomenting the paſſions which miſguide it, that we found the genuine Republick, if it be worth our founding.

If this be true otherwiſe, how much more ſince the bleſſed gift of Chriſtianity has been ſhowered down upon us from above; which gives us better motives, and better means, for bringing into captivity every imagination to a more perfect law than was known before; but offers no indulgence, no flattery to the natural man: nay, it even rejects the high unbending ſpirit, which was too much the admiration of antiquity, and ſubſtitutes in its place lowlineſs and meekneſs. It was not in vain that at the firſt dawning of this light was proclaimed, "peace upon earth, good will towards "men;" the beginning of that which St. James ſo

beautifully and ſo truly deſcribes; "The Wiſdom "that is from above is firſt pure, then peaceable, "gentle, and eaſy to be intreated, full of mercy "and good fruits, without partiality, and without "hypocriſy[b];" which has been remarkably exemplified in the hiſtory of the Chriſtian world always in exact proportion to the ſcope and ſway given to true Chriſtianity; being the very reverſe of the ſad ſcenes lately exhibited, the offspring of worldly wiſdom operating by the means of worldly affections. Acting under that holy law we ſhall prepare ourſelves the better for any viciſſitudes of fortune, for the encreaſed enjoyment of the good, and the patient enduring of the evil; and whilſt we propagate its doctrines around us, we ſhall prepare others for being both better citizens, and better rulers, if ſuch be in any degree their lot, under any form of Government. Our own, which we believe, on good grounds as I truſt, to be the moſt perfect combination of the means of human policy yet ſeen in the world, will ſhine forth with redoubled luſtre.

The Concluſion from the whole is, that Man ac-

[b] James iii. 17.

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cording to the dictates of nature ought to be placed in a ſtate of diſcipline; that all Government is a ſtate of diſcipline; that Religion is alſo a ſtate of diſcipline, eſpecially the Chriſtian; mild and beneficent as its complexion is, it is ſtill a ſtate of ſevere diſcipline. It enjoins ſelf-denial, and a renewal of the inner man, and a ſubjugation of the fleſh to the ſpirit: it enjoins continual repentance, as neceſſary to the condition of frail man, and whilſt it offers us heavenly grace, as the ſolace of our mind, and alleviation of our labours, yet it offers it only in conſequence of our ſtrenuous and humble endeavours, and in juſt proportion to the ſame. It calls upon us alſo to uſe our Reaſon diſcreetly, and to look up for farther direction even in that reſpect to the Father of lights, and the Revelation which he has vouchſafed from above.

In this day of our humiliation therefore let us look back on theſe things. "When God's judge-"ments are in the earth," ſays the Prophet, "the "inhabitants of the world ſhould learn righteouſ-"neſs[c]." His judgments were never more remarkably diſplayed, than of late. The ſcourge of war

[c] Iſ. xxvi. 9.

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was never inflicted more grievouſly, nor with a wider range of devaſtation, accompanied with thoſe yet more dreadful plagues of civil commotion, hidden conſpiracy, and daring rebellion. We have not been ourſelves exempt from theſe curſes; though God in his mercy has kept the war at a diſtance from us, yet have we ſorely felt its burthens, and have had perpetual cauſe for alarm and anxiety; nor have our fellow-citizens been altogether free from the infatuation which has deſolated the continent. Thoſe of our neighbouring iſland have drunk deep of the bitter draught. Nor are theſe ſorrows and anxieties paſt. The Viſitation of God is now for a ſecond time ſeen amongſt us in the deficiency of our crops. I preſume not to pronounce concerning theſe things as the judgements of God for any particular purpoſe; but it is wiſe in us to conſider them as his chaſtiſements in general, and given for our admonition.

Let us therefore devoutly turn unto God, and pray that he would ſtill keep theſe evils at a diſtance from us, and that he would eradicate any ſeeds of corruption which may have taken root within us; and that he would relieve us from our preſent burthens and alarms; as alſo that he would turn

turn the hearts of our enemies, and teach them to tread back their footſteps, and return into the paths of Religion, Peace, and Social Order. And let us not only by prayers, but alſo by ſincere repentance ſhew ourſelves thankful for his paſt Mercies, and render ourſelves worthy, as far as the weakneſs of man will permit, of their continuance.